

The Sense in which Ethno-philosophy can Remain Relevant in 21st Century African Philosophy

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Abstract

Ethno-philosophy, as a philosophical project, has had its fair share of criticism from some professional African philosophers, with Paulin Hountondji as an outstanding critic. Ethno-philosophy is believed to be deficient in criticality and analyticity, which are considered hallmarks of good philosophy anywhere. In this paper I engage Fainos Mangena, a tireless defender of ethno-philosophy, in a critical conversation. In making a case for the continuing relevance of ethno-philosophy, while acknowledging its shortcomings, I argue that the universalist critique of ethno-philosophy has exposed the philosophical poverty of this specific form of thought. I assert that the equation of ethno-philosophy with substantive African philosophy will lead to the emergence of an impoverished African philosophical tradition, notwithstanding the desirability of a unique African philosophy distinguishable from non-African philosophical traditions—in particular the Western philosophical tradition. I point out that Innocent Asouzu and J.O. Chimakonam's *Ibuanyidanda* ontology and *Ezumezu* logical system demonstrate the viability of a philosophical programme that seeks to transcend ethno-philosophy by enriching it with concepts that promote the criticality and analyticity demanded by critics of ethno-philosophy, in a manner conducive to system-building.

Keywords: Ethno-philosophy; African philosophy; universalists; particularists; *Ibuanyidanda* philosophy; *Ezumezulo*

Introduction

African philosophers like Bodunrin (1991), Hallen (2002; 2016), Hountondji (1996), and Oruka (1990) cite the relative absence of criticality, analyticity, and originality when disparaging ethno-philosophy. In his “Some comments on Africanising the



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philosophy curriculum,” Hallen (2016) notes that while it can be said that the universalist critique of ethno-philosophy has indeed reduced its influence, this proto-philosophy still has its defenders. He mentions the Zimbabwean philosopher Fainos Mangena and myself as two philosophers who still vigorously defend ethno-philosophy.¹ In two articles, titled “Ethno-philosophy is Rational: A Reply to Two Famous Critics” (Mangena 2014a) and “In Defence of Ethno-philosophy: A Brief Response to Kanu’s Eclecticism” (Mangena 2014b), Mangena asserts that ethno-philosophy is sufficiently critical and should be for Africans what Greek philosophy, for instance, is for Greeks. In this paper, I will, in part, enter into a critical conversation with Mangena on how I think ethno-philosophy can be relevant in the 21st century, following the criticism of universalist philosophers like Hountondji and Appiah. In the course of this conversation, I will highlight the similarities and differences between my approach and Mangena’s approach to ethno-philosophy.

I will make a case for the continuing relevance of ethno-philosophy, both as communal worldviews of African societies and as an academic enterprise, by pointing out how the innovative Nigerian philosophers, Innocent Asouzu and J.O. Chimakonam, have drawn on the resources of ethno-philosophy in building or attempting to build thought-systems in the 21st century. I do not assert that the highly individualistic and critical works of these Nigerian philosophers are ethno-philosophical. The point I want to make is that the last has certainly not been heard of ethno-philosophy and that despite its shortcoming, which has been ably pointed out by universalists like Hountondji and Bodunrin, ethno-philosophy can still be a source of philosophical ideas for contemporary philosophers committed to the understanding of philosophy as an individual critical enterprise.

I do not suggest that the critical and creative transformation of traditional worldviews has been accomplished only by these two philosophers. I use them to illustrate my point about the continuing value of ethno-philosophy because these two philosophers have not only critically engaged with ethno-philosophical data, but have also built thought-systems around a simple set of general ideas which they subsequently promoted as universally applicable. The originality of the results achieved by Asouzu and Chimakonam in the field of African metaphysics and logic, and their focus on system-building, justify my selection of these thinkers in arguing for the continuing relevance of ethno-philosophy in 21st-century African philosophy. Their works are relatively recent and have not received wide attention. While Asouzu adopts the epistemological

1 Ikuenobe (2004) is another consistent defender of ethno-philosophy as a philosophically viable form of thought. For him, the universalist critique of ethno-philosophy is basically inspired by an uncritical acceptance of the method of logical positivism whose narrow scientific and empirical focus limits the horizon of philosophical discourse. While Ikuenobe endorses the idea that ethno-philosophy remains relevant to the project of African philosophy, he does not go as far as Mangena in promoting it as substantive African philosophy.

instrument of complementary reflection to achieve his goal, Chimakonam adopts what he calls the conversational method.

While Mangena believes that ethno-philosophy in its basic form of communal worldviews is equivalent to African philosophy or, better still, the fundamental philosophical tradition of Africans, in the way that there is Greek or British philosophy, I regard ethno-philosophy as a proto-philosophy. As a proto-philosophy, I believe that ethno-philosophy can be a real source of philosophical ideas that can give African philosophical thought a distinct character in the global space of all philosophies. Unlike Mangena, I advocate that African philosophers strive for syntheses that overcome the critical shortcoming of ethno-philosophy while building thought-systems as some sort of alternative constructive programmes to ethno-philosophy. I will argue specifically that:

1. The critique of ethno-philosophy by the universalists cannot be dismissed offhand as Mangena does.
2. The philosophical agenda Mangena tries to set before African philosophers is, in fact, the creation of rigorous thought-systems and philosophical products that can be distinguished from the thought-systems and philosophical products of non-African cultures.
3. While ethno-philosophy can be a veritable source of philosophical ideas, African philosophy cannot rest here but must go beyond ethno-philosophy in the search for individual thought-systems that are universally applicable while retaining local flavour.
4. *Ibuanyidanda* ontology and *Ezumezu* logical system are two examples of African philosophical products that draw on ethno-philosophy while actively projecting a universalist ambition.

The paper is divided into five sections. Section one is the introduction. Section two clarifies the term ethno-philosophy. Section three examines Mangena's understanding of ethno-philosophy. Section four references *Ibuanyidanda* ontology and *Ezumezu* logical system in an attempt to show how ethno-philosophy can play an important role in inspiring African philosophers to pay attention to system-building in the 21st century. Section five summarises the content of the paper.

The Concept of Ethno-philosophy

The term "ethno-philosophy" was popularised in a pejorative sense by Hountondji. Ethno-philosophy encompasses the project that seeks to promote the "collective cultural consciousness or values of a people as their philosophy" (Njoku 2002, 12). Hountondji (2004, 529) understands ethno-philosophy to mean the body of unsystematised knowledge that projects the idea that all Africans or specific African ethnic groups "share a collective world-view" and that "these collective world-views may be called philosophical ... that all we have to do is to discover these collective philosophies, to study them as accurately as possible, and display them for the use and intellectual

delectation of the external world.” Hountondji (2004) refers to “the use and intellectual delectation of the external world” to underline the particularism of the ethno-philosophical project, the insistence on a unique African philosophy that can distinguish itself from Western philosophy and the philosophies of other cultures. African philosophy here is understood as the body of philosophical knowledge, generated by African and non-African philosophers, dealing with African phenomena and the systematic study of these phenomena. The emphasis on uniqueness by the ethno-philosophers is best appreciated in light of the very negative, and even racist, statements made about Africans’ capacity for critical thinking by Western thinkers and missionaries like G.W.F. Hegel, Samuel Baker, Levy-Bruhl, and Richard F. Burton (see Njoku 2002, 8–9).

Some of these celebrated ethno-philosophers include L.S. Senghor, Alexis Kagame, John Mbiti, Julius Nyerere, Placide Tempels, Cheikh Anta Diop, and Marcel Griaule. The ethno-philosophers see no reason for the cosmologies of traditional African societies and their belief systems not to count as philosophy. Over time, the fierce critics of ethno-philosophy came to be known as universalists. Universalism in African philosophy was contrasted with particularism. While universalism favours an African philosophy that embraces the analytical methodology of Western philosophy—and especially the Anglo-American analytic tradition—particularism insists that African philosophy should develop along its own line and not be limited by Western philosophy (see Etieyibo 2015; Matolino 2015). The set of African philosophers called ethno-philosophers are radical particularists to the extent that they promote ethno-philosophy as a unique form of thought that effectively distinguishes African philosophy from Western philosophy.

Thus, the particularist stance of ethno-philosophy implicates the ethno-philosophy-universalism controversy in the particularism-universalism debate. The ethno-philosophical stance, like the broader particularist thesis, protests the dogmatic claim of philosophy having an absolute set of determinative criteria discovered in the Western philosophical tradition, especially the Anglo-American analytic tradition. The universalists, or modernists, insist that the analytical method of philosophising is culture-neutral. Jones (2001, 218–219) justifies the universalist thesis by claiming that philosophy transcends cultural borders and the categorisation of persons and groups, adheres to a single critical methodology, and essentially engages only generalities. He, however, acknowledges the possibility of the generalist claims and preoccupations of philosophy falling short of the ideal of universality by virtue of their incompleteness, which may open up universalism to charges of bias and perspectivism. Some particularists who defend ethno-philosophy believe that the universalists have merely embraced Western intellectual interests and commitments as universal standards of rationality (see Mangena 2014a; 2014b). Van Hook (1997, 385) concurs, asserting that the universalist thesis follows from the “influence of Western philosophical paradigms which they [African universalists] take as normative and to which they expect African philosophy to conform.” For Van Hook (1997, 391), the universalist thesis is trivial

since the supposed universal essence of philosophy may mean nothing more than the conviction that philosophy involves “a rational critique of received opinions.” Matolino (2015, 435–436) considers the particularism-universalism debate in the context of analytic philosophy’s marginalisation of African philosophy and rejects any claim of superiority of the one over the other, insisting that both traditions are equal by virtue of their engagement with “reflecting on the nature of humankind” and that African philosophy has its own method and history.

Making a case for the traditionalist/particularist perspective, Hofmeyer (2004, 74) asserts that the West cannot lay absolute claim to the universal because what is truly universal is “lack” or “incompleteness,” not a supposedly fully realised value that evolved within a particular culture. The non-dogmatic stance of the particularists leads Eze (2001, 209) to assume that the defenders of particularism are the true universalists since “they consider the free pursuit of knowledge, wherever knowledge may be found.”

The argument for uniqueness made by the ethno-philosophers was not lost on African philosophers like Kwasi Wiredu, Segun Gbadegesin, Kwame Gyekye, Henry Odera Oruka, and others sympathetic to the universalist stance. Wiredu is counted among the universalists; yet, he pioneered what is now regarded as academic ethno-philosophy. Wiredu sees no reason for African philosophers not to interrogate ancestral wisdom as long as this interrogation is carried out in the best critical tradition of philosophy. It is instructive that this search for a synthesis, the willingness to subject communal worldviews to rigorous philosophical scrutiny, blurs the line between ethno-philosophy and academic ethno-philosophy up to a point (see Njoku 2002; Rettova 2002).

As a universalist, Wiredu is inclined to see ethno-philosophy simply as traditional thought pattern that indicates the general mode of thinking of pre-scientific societies rather than a way of philosophising specifically African (Wiredu 1980, 39). For Mangena, ethno-philosophy is critical: the bias against it is a consequence of the dominant status of Western philosophy, which has imposed its logocentrism on the world as a universal procedure (cf. Hofmeyer 2004, 54–59; Mangena 2014b). The Greek term “logos” can mean “word,” “thought” or “reason.” Logocentrism, in this sense, implies logic-centred. Logocentrism captures the attitude that considers inferential thinking, as it developed in the West, the truly universal method of philosophising (see Chimakonam 2018, 101; Gyekye 1997, 29; Outlaw 1987).

African philosophy as a written tradition has evolved against the background of developments in contemporary Western philosophy, a thought tradition that values critical thinking as indispensable to the enterprise of philosophy. While indeed it can be argued that there are different thought-traditions within Western philosophy—the analytic, existential, phenomenological, pragmatic, Catholic, and so forth—these traditions all emphasise the importance of critical engagement with texts, which may come across as evidence-based reasoning, assignation of truth values to propositions and the clarification of basic premises, the deduction of general principles based on

reflection on states of affairs in the world, and the construction of coherent thought-systems that are thereafter sustained at more or less high level of abstraction. This method of philosophising dominates Western philosophy. Its success in a politically, scientifically and economically ascendant West provided Westerners some sort of justification in regarding the dominant Western philosophical method as the truly universal method. In recent years, this Western appropriation of the universal has been dismissed by thinkers from the global south as an imposition of a particular cultural (Western) perspective on the rest of the world. Olufemi Taiwo (1998, 4) puts it succinctly: “The West, in constructing the universal, instead of truly embracing all that there is, or at least what of it can be so embraced, has merely puffed itself up and invited the rest of humanity, or the educated segment of it, to be complicit in this historical swindle.” The particularist stance is a response to this imposition. Ethno-philosophy is a radical particularist perspective.

This paper does not seek to defend the Western method as the only valid universal method, nor does it seek to discredit ethno-philosophy. By method, I mean a clear set of rules guiding the creation and combination of philosophical concepts. The term “universal” is used to indicate that which is applicable across cultures in the sense of transcending local conditions and limitations. Thus, this paper does not defend the dominant Western analytical procedure as the true universal procedure. As Okere, Njoku, and Devisch (2005) have noted, knowledge begins its journey of universal applicability as a particular perspective, which is almost always culture-specific. I assume that mature philosophy should have a level of relevance beyond the culture in which it was first incubated. Proper philosophical thinking should produce universally applicable concepts and coherent thought-systems that go beyond description of worldviews and the analysis of proverbs and wise-sayings; it should transcend the narrative technique and increasingly engage with concepts and propositions as well as claims at a high level of generalities, such that philosophical products transcend the specific space of their birth and become relevant for all humanity. The criterion for identifying viable philosophical thinking will then no longer be based solely on how critical a specific kind of philosophical thinking is in the sense understood broadly by Western philosophers: it will rather be based on criticality in the sense of the capacity to produce philosophies that transcend the environment of their birth and sufficiently achieve a level of generalisation that makes them appealing or intelligible to all sections of humanity in the global marketplace of ideas.

Mangena’s Criticism of Hountondji and Appiah and His Defence of Ethno-philosophy

In this section, I will highlight Hountondji and Appiah’s criticism of ethno-philosophy, which Mangena latches onto while defending the ethno-philosophical enterprise. I will engage Mangena in a critical conversation and evaluate the strength and weakness of his pro-ethno-philosophy stance.

Looking back to the time when ethno-philosophy was very popular, Hountondji writes in his 2004 contribution to Wiredu's celebrated anthology *A Companion to African Philosophy*:

Not so long ago, there was a widespread belief that the only way for Africans to do philosophy was to philosophize about Africa. More exactly put, it was believed, first, that all Africans (or at a lower level of generalization, all the Wolof or Yorubas or Bantus, etc.) share a collective world-view; second, that these collective world-views may be called philosophical; and, third, that all we have to do is to discover these collective philosophies, to study them as accurately as possible, and display them for the use and intellectual delectation of the external world. (Hountondji 2004, 529)

For Hountondji (2004, 530), ethno-philosophy is in fact “a branch of ethnology mistaken for philosophy.” Ethno-philosophy is folk philosophy, an unsystematised and uncritical accumulation of traditional wisdom. Hountondji (1996, 56) believes that the philosophical enterprise adheres to a “single style of enquiry.” This universalist understanding of philosophy does not imply that diverse cultures must have or share the same themes or subjects. Hountondji's goal is demonstrating that philosophy everywhere must carry the stamp of criticality and analyticity if it must count as philosophy.

Appiah basically agrees with Hountondji's stance on ethno-philosophy. Declaring ethno-philosophy a kind of “oral folk philosophy,” Appiah (1992, 91) notes that its authority “lies in its purported antiquity, not the quality of the reasoning—or evidence—that sustains it, and which is usually unable to treat critical activity as disinterested.” Appiah thinks that the collectivisation claim of ethno-philosophy, or what Hountondji calls the “myth of unanimity,” is false because Africa itself is not a homogenous socio-cultural expression. Nevertheless, Appiah is less strident in his criticism than Hountondji. While he questions the claim that there is a uniform philosophy for all Africans—for example, ethno-philosophy—he does not assert that traditional thought-systems are completely devoid of reason or evidence. As he notes: “Concentrating on the non-cognitive features of traditional religions [for instance] not only misrepresents them but also leads to an underestimation of the role of reason in the life of traditional cultures” (Appiah 1992, 134). Like Wiredu, Appiah is concerned about the unrestrained celebration of uniqueness. Appiah (1992, 134–135) insists that Africans can only begin to find solutions to their problems if they approach these problems “as human problems arising out of a special situation ... not ... as African problems, generated by our being somehow unlike others.”

Having highlighted Hountondji and Appiah's perspectives on ethno-philosophy, I will now proceed to discuss Mangena's criticism of these two scholars and his own defence of ethno-philosophy. He expresses displeasure at the reluctance of universalists like Hountondji and Appiah to regard ethno-philosophy as the original and true philosophy of Africans in the same sense that there is a British philosophy, an American philosophy, a Greek philosophy, and so forth (Mangena 2014a, 31). He disagrees with the basic

views of Hountondji and Appiah that ethno-philosophy is a collection of uncritical beliefs, customs, and traditional values. Mangena (2014a, 31–32) asserts that:

[E]thno-philosophy is not a mere collection of beliefs, customs, values and traditions of a particular group of people; it also involves critical analysis of the same. *Reasoning* involves analyzing the relationship between or among given premises and drawing conclusions from them. Thus reasoning—as an analytical task—is a product of two mental processes, namely, deduction and induction ... It is unfortunate that most definitions of ethno-philosophy, especially by professional philosophers, have tended to focus on the “collection” task, thereby deliberately ignoring the “analysis” task.

According to Mangena, the logical necessity, which connects premises with conclusions in a deductive argument, and the probability which goes with induction can all be found in ethno-philosophical thinking. For him, scepticism about the criticality of ethno-philosophy arises when we insist that the Western analytical method is the only universal method of philosophising; approached from an African inductive context, ethno-philosophy is critical and analytical. Mangena tries to show that proverbs, which universalists claim to be uncritical and unworthy to be regarded as philosophical, are products of critical thinking. The Shona proverb *rume rimwe harikombi churu*, translated into English means “one man cannot surround an anthill.” The import of this proverb is that a big task is better accomplished when people come together to work. The inventor of the proverb, according to Mangena, reached his or her conclusion inductively, after a serious analysis of the facts before him or her in the Shona society. Based on this example and similar examples of the rationality of proverbs, Mangena (2014a, 33) asserts that: “The job of the ethno-philosopher, then, would be to collect and analyse these proverbs to see if philosophical thinking can be mined from them.”

The quotation above betrays Mangena’s struggle to convince himself of the philosophical adequacy of ethno-philosophy. His call for the ethno-philosopher, precisely the academic ethno-philosopher or professional thinker, to scrutinise basic worldviews is not different from Hountondji and Appiah’s demand that African philosophers subject communal worldviews to rigorous criticism. Indeed, it can be said that the works of Innocent Onyewuenyi (1996) and Hasskei M. Majeed (2017) on reincarnation, Wiredu (1983) and Gyekye (1999) on the Akan concept of mind, and Segun Gbadegesin (2004) on the Yoruba concept of mind, are instances of professional philosophers trying “to see if philosophical thinking can be mined from” traditional or ancestral worldviews. Mangena believes that as human beings, Africans cannot be lacking in reason, and since communal wisdom exhibits inductive and deductive thinking “it follows that Africans who have, for years, defended ethno-philosophy are justified in maintaining that it is a genuine philosophy. Thus claims by Hountondji and Appiah that ethno-philosophy is not based on reason or evidence cannot be justified” (Mangena 2014a, 34). Here Appiah, especially, will say that Mangena misreads him. While Hountondji’s stance on ethno-philosophy is decidedly dismissive, Appiah is more cautious. He acknowledges that traditional cultures achieved some level of critical

thinking (Appiah 1992, 134). These two philosophers' main grouse with ethno-philosophy is that this tradition is insufficiently critical and not universally applicable.

Mangena turns the idea of “unanimity” on its head in his bid to defend the notion, expressing it in terms of an African consensus about the problems of war, hunger, diseases, and so forth that afflict the continent. Hountondji and Appiah understand unanimity in terms of cultural and epistemic homogeneity. Now Mangena (2014a, 35) affirms that unanimity “cannot be imaginary as Hountondji and Appiah will have us believe—since it is based on the African people’s existential experiences and realities.” Mangena references the existential realities of war and poverty in Africa to build an unconvincing case for the truth of unanimity. On this matter, Majeed supplies a better response to the charge of unanimity levelled by the universalists. Justifying his assertion that the concept of reincarnation is a collective Akan belief, he says that a worldview can be attributed to an ethnic group by virtue of most members of the ethnic group accepting such a worldview, regardless of some members not accepting that worldview (Majeed 2017, 240).

Like Mangena, I think that ethno-philosophy deserves more respect than has been so far granted it. Unlike Mangena, however, I do not think that ethno-philosophy should be equated with African philosophy on account of its critical and constructive deficiency which the universalist critique exposed. Mangena is so fixated on ethno-philosophy that he goes as far as rejecting the important project of reconciling the positions of the universalists and the particularists. He dismisses such a project as unnecessary eclecticism (Mangena 2014b, 103; cf Kanu 2013). He correctly quotes me as defending the continuing relevance of ethno-philosophy but does not subject my proposal that ethno-philosophy should be seen only as a foundation of African philosophy to scrutiny. I noted that: “It is true that ethno-philosophy (which encompasses communal and traditional African thought, and the scholarly endeavour of their systematisation in the light of Western philosophy) marked one tremendous leap for African philosophy, but it is only a stage, a foundational level, of African philosophy” (Agada 2013, 240). I used the word “foundation” in a non-absolutist sense, aware that some African philosophers may well find philosophical foundations and inspiration outside ethno-philosophy.

I believe that the project Mangena derides as eclecticism is a promising one. I regard it as the quest for syntheses that can be distinctly African and universally applicable. This insight will help us better appreciate Nze who scoffs at the idea that the more African philosophy resembles Western philosophy, the more respect African philosophy will earn globally. Here we may find a path to the strongest criticism of Hountondji.

Mangena cites Nze² approvingly as demanding that African philosophy must have an African foundation if the world is going to regard African philosophy as having something unique to contribute to world philosophy (Mangena 2014b, 104).

The affirmation of the universality of the critical and analytical approach to philosophy may see African philosophy increasingly resembling Western philosophy (cf. Mangena 2014b). This possibility explains Mangena's trenchant criticism of the universalists and his insistence that ethno-philosophy is indispensable to African philosophy. He writes: "While cultural encounters cannot be avoided and may have played a part on [sic] the thinking of most Universalists ... indigeneity remains an integral part of a people's philosophy" (Mangena 2014b, 102). Tilting towards the political, Mangena (2014b, 103) writes that:

In the minds of African philosophers who subscribe to Particularism, professional philosophy only seeks to uproot the African from his informal traditions and cultures and give him or her new identity and this is highly unacceptable since it is tantamount to proselytisation of African cultures and value systems.

One major issue here is that Mangena overlooks the impact of Western colonialism and the current process of globalisation. The Western impact has been so decisive that it will amount to wishful thinking to assume that informal African traditions will ever remain the same following Africa's encounter with the West. Africa cannot return to the pre-colonial past and start all over on its journey of progress along its chosen path, and in moving forward from where colonialism left it, Africa must come to terms with a mutant identity it seems unable to effortlessly recognise. The dilemma of Africa is at once the dilemma of African philosophy. Bernasconi (1997, 188) puts the dilemma of African philosophy in its relation to a hegemonic Western philosophy thus: "Western philosophy traps African philosophy in a double bind: either African philosophy is so similar to Western philosophy that it makes no distinctive contribution and effectively disappears, or it is so different that its credentials to be genuine philosophy will always be in doubt."

I think African philosophers should give careful thought to this dilemma. Philosophers like Hountondji are faced with the first possibility, while philosophers like Mangena are faced with the second possibility. One may object that we have a pseudo-problem here since the adoption of Western methods and paradigms need not affect the content of African philosophical products. It may be true that the content of African philosophy

2 The radical particularist thesis of Nze (cited in Mangena 2014, 104) asserts that: "The practice which has grown uncontrolled since the colonial times in which African intellectuals seek to construct native African theories upon the logical foundation of the West is simply misguided. Western intellectuals read such works and toss it [sic] aside because they see nothing different in what they have since accomplished." Nze may not be right in asserting that African intellectual products built on the foundation of Western knowledge-systems are entirely useless. He seems to reject the possibility, indeed actuality, of cross-cultural borrowings. Nevertheless, his main goal is to draw the attention of African philosophers to the importance of producing distinctly African thought-systems.

does not have to be radically transformed by the adoption of Western analytical methods. Yet, it may be that the uncritical adoption of Western methods can determine the content of African philosophy to some extent (as African philosophers unconsciously or consciously strive towards the Western ideal), which may be problematic in the age of globalisation when intercultural and comparative philosophy seeks to discover what new insights different philosophical traditions can bring to the global space. Chimakonam (2018, 2015a), for instance, believes that African philosophy must have its own unique methodology, while a philosopher like Nze (see Mangena 2014, 104) asserts that adopting Western theoretical frameworks compromises the content of African philosophy, as originality is lost along the way. Mangena believes that the Western exclusionist tendency accounts for the universalist rejection of ethno-philosophy. This grouse with Western exclusivism and the desire to have something distinctly African are implicated in the demand for an African method. This is the case because Mangena, for instance, insists that ethno-philosophy follows a method that is deductive and inductive and is, therefore, just as critical as Western philosophy. Mangena's position may appear extreme, but it is instructive that he considers the position of the universalists to be extreme in its denial of criticality to ethno-philosophy. Is there a way out of this conundrum? I will attempt an answer by expatiating on Bruce Janz's call for an African philosophical genealogy and Van Hook's (2002) thought on the universalist thesis. Janz (2016, 48) notes insightfully: "One project I would love to see African philosophers engage in would be a kind of philosophical genealogy, a return to the source. By that, I do not mean another attempt to locate philosophy in some culturally ancient form, but rather, to think about the unique well-spring of concepts that continues to this day for African philosophy."

The challenge is, no doubt, a tough one. The attempt at discovering the "well-spring" of ideas that inspire us is not an isolated or one-dimensional effort. One cannot consciously set out to find this unique well-spring and reach it because this origin cannot be comprehended independent of African historicity. Concepts develop within a cultural matrix, in favour of or in rebellion against this cultural matrix. Perhaps we can recast Janz's challenge in this form: "Where can we locate the unique source of African philosophy, such that we can indeed distinguish African philosophical products from other philosophical products like those of the Occident and Orient, if not in form, then in content?" A philosopher like Mangena will say that the ultimate source of original African concepts can only be found in African traditional worldviews, the cosmology, ethics, metaphysics, values, and general practices of the African people. I agree with Mangena here, but I am also persuaded that the universalist critique of ethno-philosophy commits African philosophers to go beyond ethno-philosophy and develop critical systems of thought, which can enrich not only African philosophy but also world philosophy, especially in the age of globalisation that has seen the fast evolution of intercultural philosophy.

Rejecting ethno-philosophy as a unique well-spring of African philosophical ideas will deny African philosophy the moral high ground to condemn its marginalisation by

Western philosophy. Recognising ethno-philosophy as a major source of African philosophy confirms the validity of the pluralist project that Van Hook (2002) has eloquently argued for as a better alternative to the Western-conditioned narrative of universalism. Van Hook's recommendation that African philosophers should seek foundational elements of their philosophical agenda from all reliable and useful sources, including Africa's own knowledge structures, aligns perfectly with my construal of the quest of individual African thinkers for philosophical syntheses that draw inspiration from ethno-philosophy. The reconstructive pluralist project will then be seen as an attempt to bridge the particularist-universalist dichotomy, a reconciliation which can and should endorse the continuing relevance of ethno-philosophy in the collective effort of redirecting 21st-century African philosophy towards greater systematicity and intellectual rigour. In overcoming the dichotomy and creating thought-systems that have become independent of ethno-philosophy, which inspired these thought-systems in the beginning, African thinkers can claim universality.

In Search of Individual Syntheses: *Ibuanyidanda* Ontology and *Ezumezu* Logical System

In this section, I wish to demonstrate the claim that Asouzu and Chimakonam drew on the worldviews and traditional wisdom embedded in the Igbo language in developing their systems. Their major objective was building a coherent system, not just critically interrogating traditional worldviews.

If critically-minded contemporary philosophers can find a well-spring of philosophical concepts in the traditional wisdom stored in an African language, then ethno-philosophy is still relevant to African philosophy—Hountondji's devastating criticism notwithstanding. Unlike philosophers such as Wiredu and Gyekye who also drew on the worldviews of their ethnic group, Asouzu and Chimakonam moved further away from the foundational data supplied by ethno-philosophy and actively promoted their systems as universally applicable. Consequently, they referenced Igbo belief-system less frequently and celebrated system building, an aspect of philosophy that has not received due attention from African philosophers.

The overarching thesis of Asouzu's complementary ontology is the assertion that the universe is a complementary network of things, people, ideas, values, and so forth. All entities, all elements, are missing links in the sense that they complement each other and serve to complete the universe in their complementary unity. Missing links are necessary links, since they must exist for the universe itself to be. Complementary reflection, the epistemological vehicle of Asouzu's philosophy, makes the advocacy for existence as a totality characterised by comprehensiveness and future referentiality (Asouzu 2004, 94; 2007; cf. Edet 2016, 19–28). The method of complementary reflection endorses dialectics in a process that sees the human mind opening itself to the knowledge that what on the surface may appear like contradictions are in fact the diversity of complements in the world. Reality is the unity of diverse complements.

Asouzu calls these complements “missing links.” Thus his dialectical system is different from the Hegelian system that references terms like thesis, antithesis, and synthesis in the framework of absolute idealism. The mind, in its capacity to totalise, necessarily seeks the reconciliation of these complements. The reconciliation of complements, which often manifest themselves as binaries—man-woman, day-night, good-bad, big-small, me-you, we-they, black-white, and so forth—becomes the basis of optimism, an attitude that indicates the teleological orientation of the thinking mind. These basic premises and procedure constitute the foundation of Asouzu’s optimistic philosophy of missing links. A detailed discussion of Asouzu’s complementarism is beyond the scope of this paper. However, enough will be said to, hopefully, persuade the reader that ethno-philosophy can produce thought-systems whose final constitution will appear completely independent of ethno-philosophy.

The fact that all entities serve one missing link or the other indicates that the universe is moving in the direction of a future convergence that promises the realisation of a more complete universe. The human being grasps this comprehensiveness and future orientation in the transcendental unity of consciousness. Dialectic movement is presupposed in the reconciliation of missing links. This dialectic reconciles both direct and non-direct conflicts of symmetrical and asymmetrical opposites, thus making the Asouzian synthesis one of the convergence of a myriad of theses and anti-theses (Asouzu 2004, 99). He writes: “Granted that all finite beings have those things that give them their forms, these can hardly be penetrated within the framework of their specific differences outside of the framework provided by all missing links. Hence, all matters get their full meaning, can be articulated and legitimised adequately, only when viewed and measured within the framework of the totality of reality” (Asouzu 2007, 189). He says elsewhere that “all missing links are fundamental towards understanding the world in an authentic true manner since they are geared towards a total, comprehensive, universal, and authentic comprehension of reality” (Asouzu 2004, 407).

The doctrine of missing links throws up the idea of the joy of being, which locates the meaning of life in the individual’s pursuit of life-goals within the space allowed by the society and morality, and as these goals coalesce in the pursuit of perfection. For, it is in the pursuit of perfection that the world of complements moves towards the fullest possible accommodation of diversity. Asouzu is aware of the limitations in the world that frustrate the quest for meaning and cast doubt on the idea of perfection itself, but he identifies these limitations as part of the furniture of the world and that they should, in fact, spur optimism since they are gradually being overcome as the world moves towards the condition of the fullest development of missing links (Asouzu 2004, 372–374).

At this juncture, let us see where the notion of *Ibuanyidanda* (complementarism) is coming from. Let us discover the ultimate source of Asouzu’s highly individualistic and generalised philosophy. Asouzu looks back to his traditional Igbo society to find the basis of his theory of complementation. He finds this inspiration in the Igbo idea of

community, togetherness, and cooperation. Asouzu (2007, 235) makes it clear that he was inspired by “the ideas of anonymous traditional African [Igbo] philosophers of the complementary system of thought.” Unlike Oruka (1990), Asouzu does not identify these traditional philosophers, but he thinks that their ideas live on in the communal worldviews of his Igbo society. He believes that these philosophers promoted the complementary system of thought and that this very system is, in fact, the common mode of thinking in traditional African societies, from West Africa to South Africa (Asouzu 2007, 235–236).

While explaining the idea of *Ibuanyidanda*, Asouzu delves into Igbo cosmology and appeals directly to the Igbo language for support. He examines Igbo terms like *uwa ezuoke* (the world is incomplete), *onye ka ozuru* (who is perfect?), *ihe ukwu kpe azu* (the greatest events are in the future), *njiko ka* (togetherness is the greatest virtue), *Ibuanyidanda* (no task is impossible for the ant). In a revealing passage, Asouzu (2004, 108–109) writes:

One of the most common metaphors or imageries that the traditional Igbo uses to express the idea of complementarity is that of the collective effort needed by ants (*danda*) to lift heavy crumbs or loads (*ibu*) that would otherwise remain an insurmountable task. This is the *ibu anyi danda approach* or the *traditional Igbo spirit and understanding of complementarity* ... This experience is captured by the Igbo work song: *Bunu bunu oo ibu anyi danda* ... The idea of complementarity spans the whole Igbo thought system in its understanding of man as a being caught in the challenges of historicity and relativity ... Complementarity (*ibu anyi danda*) is an opportunity to seek relations, causes and meaning; it is an opportunity for the ego to reach out to something outside of itself ... Complementarity is thus the unifying force of all community-centred reasoning ... The ability to enter into complementary relationship gives units the forcefulness they need to uphold their unity in diversity.

Asouzu avoids positive reference to ethno-philosophy and masks his debt to it by attributing traditional Igbo worldviews to “anonymous” traditional thinkers. Since he fails to identify these traditional philosophers, and based on his extensive use of Igbo traditional wisdom in the construction of his optimistic philosophy, it can be argued that he drew inspiration from ethno-philosophy.

Like Asouzu’s complementarism, Chimakonam’s *Ezumezu* logical system exemplifies the capacity of ethno-philosophy to instigate the creation of highly coherent thought-systems that, paradoxically, break away from ethno-philosophy in their final constitution, such that references to the particular culture to which ethno-philosophy is affiliated becomes minimal as thought attains higher levels of generalities. Chimakonam deploys the method of conversational thinking to achieve his goal of formulating an African logical system that lays claim to universalism as an extension of classical logic. The conversational method promotes the eclecticism that Mangena downplays. This is the case because it seeks a middle position that reconciles the universalist and particularist schools. Chimakonam identifies a number of principles that should guide

conversational thinking. I briefly discuss the principles relevant to my objectives in this paper.

The principles are transformative indigenisation, noetic re-Africanisation, and moderate decolonisation (Chimakonam 2015a, 27–28). Transformative indigenisation reorients the African philosopher using non-African philosophical categories and imposes an obligation to give the foreign categories an African flavour. This is the same as domesticating what is foreign. Noetic re-Africanisation guards against the danger of losing mastery of African forms of thought due to erosion of the African framework by deep commitment to non-African modes of thought. This principle demands that an African philosopher, who fears that engagement with non-African theoretical schemes has placed her outside the African theoretical framework, must re-acquaint herself with what has been forgotten. In this way, a balance is found between rigid commitment to African and non-African theoretical frameworks through intercultural conversation. Moderate decolonisation asserts that a radical rejection of non-African theoretical schemes, whether for political or philosophical reasons, jeopardises the universalisation aspiration of African philosophy as the African thinker becomes complacent in her comfort zone. The principles of transformative indigenisation and noetic re-Africanisation are operative in much of contemporary African philosophy. They involve the application of analytical instruments to the data supplied by ethno-philosophy, or traditional African worldviews. Moderate decolonisation is less familiar. It promises the most original philosophising as it eschews Wiredu’s robust decolonisation and rejects Mangena’s extreme particularism. The moderate stance recommended here, allows the thought of the individual to decisively detach itself from ethno-philosophy and lay claim to the universal in the process of transcending local conditions and limitations.

In constructing the *Ezumezu* logical system, Chimakonam (2015b, 474; 2018, 96) asserts that *Ezumezu* is a distinctly African logical system with universal applicability as one out of different types of logics. According to Chimakonam, an essential quality of African logic is its characterisation by the three values of truth, falsity, and the third undetermined value, the *Ezumezu* value where the true and the false complement each other. While the true and false values are context-specific, the *Ezumezu* value is a complementary unity. When the complementary unity is fragmented the values of truth and falsity can be again recovered. The wider implication of the third value of undetermined, or *Ezumezu*, is that the law of excluded middle, which asserts that a statement is either true or false “does not fully hold in African thought system” (Okeke 2011, 98). Chimakonam believes that African/*Ezumezu* logic is trivalent because the basic African worldview interprets reality in terms of the physical, the non-physical and both the physical and the non-physical as a unity (Chimakonam 2018, 106). This belief accounts for his assertion that the law of excluded middle is not fully applicable in African logic.

In his earliest formulation of *Ezumezu* logic, Chimakonam (2011, 98–103) asserts that his African logical system is customary, topic-neutral, para-contingent, context-

dependent, and interdependent. These qualities that he attributes to the *Ezumezu* logical system underline the African communalistic, holistic, and relational approach to reality. For Chimakonam, as for Asouzu, Africans tend to determine the truth of propositions and states of affairs within larger relational contexts, which may include proximate and remote elements, in addition to the immediate facts. In response to criticism from scholars like Uduma (2015) and Nweke (2014) who question the thesis of an African logic different from classical logic, Chimakonam (2018, 97–98) has clarified that the *Ezumezu* system extends classical two-value logic to accommodate a unique African thought pattern, adding that:

It is not border-sensitive, exclusive or unconnected with the universal idea of logic ... In the *Ezumezu* proto-type, the three values are the two sub-contrary values, called *ezu* and *izu* or true and false ... *Ezumezu* logic is that type of logic that is dynamic or flexible which is why it is an alternative system. The idea of flexibility roughly refers to the relaxation of the three classical laws of thought which engendered the creation of the *Ezumezu* system. It is called African because it is developed in Africa and is largely inspired by the African ontology.

By “African ontology” Chimakonam is, of course, referring to African communal worldviews, the African understanding of the universe as consisting of the material and spiritual, the tendency towards holism, and the age-old wisdom locked up in indigenous languages. Chimakonam (2018, 112) states clearly that the *Ohakarasi* principle, which grounds parts in wholes or instantiates universals in particulars and which is constitutive of the *Ezumezu* logical system, is undergirded by the African communitarian view of “I am because we are and since we are therefore I am.” Chimakonam’s dependence on ethno-philosophy is so noticeable that Mangena (2014b, 104) considers him an ethno-philosopher, wrongly I believe, given Chimakonam’s critical depth and radical individualism. Thus, we see that Chimakonam, like Asouzu, draws inspiration from ethno-philosophy in constructing a logical system that claims universal applicability, ultimately detaching itself from Igbo traditional worldview.

Conclusion

In this paper, I identified the areas of convergence and divergence in Mangena’s defence and my own view of ethno-philosophy. While I agree with Mangena that ethno-philosophy remains important for African philosophy, I disagree with him that ethno-philosophy should be recognised as the unique philosophy of Africans in the way that there is a Greek or British philosophy. I showed in this paper that the universalist critique of ethno-philosophy is valid, given that ethno-philosophy itself is insufficiently critical. I argued in this paper that despite the shortcomings of ethno-philosophy, this specific thought-form can continue to be relevant in contemporary African philosophy by serving as a well-spring of inspiration for African philosophers. I noted that Mangena’s main interest in promoting ethno-philosophy is his desire to see a tradition of African philosophy that is distinct from non-African philosophical traditions. Bernasconi (1997) has proposed a rationale for a distinct African philosophy in the

context of global philosophical encounters. He ventures to say that if African philosophy is similar to Western philosophy, it makes no notable contribution to global philosophy. On the other hand, if we embrace uncritically Mangena's ethno-philosophical programme, African philosophy becomes so different from Western philosophy that it no longer looks like philosophy.

I argued in this paper that a possible way out of this dilemma is for African philosophers to construct thought-systems inspired by ethno-philosophy and enrich the systems so constructed with concepts and critical formulations that transcend ethno-philosophy. Consequently, I demonstrated that Asouzu's *Ibuanyidanda* ontology and Chimakonam's *Ezumezu* logical system are instances of 21st-century African philosophers relying on the resources of ethno-philosophy to construct thought-systems they claim to be uniquely African—and at the same time universally applicable. Efforts like these, I believe, demonstrate the possibilities of an “indigenizing theoretic effort,” in the words of Tsenay Serequeberhan (1994, 119), that is “in the service of revitalizing ... African existence.”

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